

### **Mamallapuram**

Mamallapuram, located by the Bay of Bengal was the harbour or port-town of the Pallavas, a famous dynasty that ruled over north Tamil Nadu from the 5th to the 9th centuries A.D. This town continued to flourish for many centuries after the Pallavas. Today, most of the monuments here are under the care of the Archaeological Survey of India (A.S.I), and is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Mamallapuram is a place full of granite boulders which the architects and sculptors of the Pallava times used to produce masterpieces of art and architecture. The cave-temples of the 7th century A.D., of which many are unfortunately incomplete, were made using rudimentary tools. Images of Hindu deities worshipped were placed on the rear wall of the main sanctum-sanctorum. They were either of stone (being part of the original rock of the cave temple itself), or were painted or made of stucco. The most famous cave temples of Mamallapuram are the Mahishasuramardini cave temple, the Varaha cave temple and the Trimurti cave temple. These monuments are replete with beautiful sculptures of various Hindu deities carved on the walls. There are many more such cave temples, but are unfinished.

### **Trimurti Cave Temple**

One among the many beautifully-carved cave temples of Mamallapuram is the Trimurti cave-temple. Unlike most of the unfinished structures in this town, this is a fully complete shrine. It has three cells cut into the rock –one each for Siva, Vishnu and Subrahmanya. The one to the extreme left is for Subrahmanya, whose sculpture is on the rear wall, standing with four arms and two devotees kneeling at his feet. This deity is seen with a rudraksha garland (mala) crossing diagonally across his chest. The central shrine, which projects a little more in front than the other two, is dedicated to Siva, whose four-armed form is sculpted on the rear wall. At a later date, a Linga was installed on the ground in front of the image of Siva. The shrine to the extreme left is for Vishnu, standing with the discus (chakra) in His upper right hand and conch (sankha) in His upper left hand; His lower right hand is held in the gesture of protection (abhaya mudra) and lower left hand rests on His hip (kati hasta)..

### **Mahishasuramardini Cave Temple**

One of the most beautiful cave-temples in Mamallapuram, despite it not being completed fully, is the one named after Mahishasuramardini. This monument has been ascribed by most scholars to the reign of Narasimhavarmam I of the 7th century C.E. This name has been given to the monument as there is a very fine bas-relief carving of Durga fighting against the demon Mahishasura who is depicted with the body of a man and head of a buffalo. The Goddess has been portrayed with multiple arms, each holding a weapon, and riding on Her mount (vahana), the lion which is pouncing towards Mahishasura and his soldiers. Durga, sitting astride the lion, Her chin tilted up, is the embodiment of victory.. The sculptors have shown that Mahishasura is on the verge of being vanquished. On the wall opposite this is another bas-relief panel of Vishnu as Anantashayee- reclining on His serpent Adishesha with five hoods. Near the feet of this recumbent image are two demons – Madhu and Khaitabha, who are shown in the pose of fleeing. At the base of the coils of Adishesha as well as above the figure of Anantashayee are images of the personification of the different weapons (ayudhas) of Vishnu like this discus (Sudharshana), conch (Panchajanya), mace (Kaumodaki) and sword (Nandaka). Kneeling at the foot of Vishnu is Bhudevi or the Goddess of the Earth.

The main shrine of this cave-temple has a superb carving of Somaskanda (Siva with Parvati and their son Skanda).

### **Varaha Cave Temple**

Situated close behind the sculptured panel known as 'Arjuna's Penance' is a small rock-cut cave shrine known as the Varaha cave. It is a typical example of a cut-in cave temple of the reign of Narasimhavarman I Pallava of the 7th century A.D. In front are pillars, beautifully moulded from top to bottom, with the squatting lion base so characteristic of Pallava architecture. Inside the main sanctum there is nothing to be seen today, but it may have contained a picture or a wooden image of a deity. There are four outstanding sculptured panels inside the cave which bespeak the excellence of the Pallava sculptor. One of these is Vishnu's third incarnation, Varaha lifting Bhu Devi (the Goddess of the Earth). Another is of Goddess Lakshmi with two elephants bathing Her with sacred water and with Her maids beside her. The third sculpture is of Goddess Durga seen with a lion and antelope behind Her and with two devotees at Her feet. The one to Her right is in the pose of cutting off his own head. This was a kind of self-sacrifice performed during the ancient and medieval times and reflected in sculpture. The fourth sculpture is of Vishnu's incarnation as Trivikrama. This deity is shown multi-armed and with one foot on the earth and the other lifted to the celestial space.

### **Krishna Mandapa**

Near the penance panel in Mamallapuram is a pillared hall (mandapa) constructed in front of a huge bas-relief panel depicting the story of Krishna holding up the Govardhana mountain. The bas-relief sculpture belongs to the Pallava time of the 7th century C.E., but the mandapa in front was built later, in the Vijayanagara era of the 15th or 16th centuries C.E. The tall figure of Krishna standing majestically holding the base of Govardhanagiri with his palm and the cowherd girls looking at Him with awe and admiration speaks volumes of the skill of the sculptors of the Pallava times. Next to Krishna stands his brother Balarama with his hand protectively around their father Nandagopa. Figures of cows peeping out from behind, a man milking a cow, ladies carrying pots of milk products, a reclining bull, and many others, make this a very life-like sculptural panel.

### **Arjuna's Penance**

One of the biggest attractions of Mamallapuram is the large bas-relief panel which is 30 metres long and 12 metres high. This outstanding sculpture belongs to the reign of Narasimhavarman I. It represents the scene of a penance by a bearded person standing one foot with the other raised and his hands held above his head with fingers intertwined. Next to this emaciated figure stands a tall and imposing sculpture of Siva with ganas at His feet. His right hand is in the varada hasta or gesture of giving a boon. Near them is a natural cleft in the rock which has been visualized by the sculptors of the Pallava times to be a river. On this large rock are sculptures of a variety of animals like a herd of elephants, lion, deer, birds, etc. Also seen are sages, demi-beings like gandharvas and kinnaras. Many scholars have opined that this entire scene represents Arjuna's penance on the Himalayas prior to the Kurukshetra war to please Lord Siva so that he may obtain from this deity the powerful Pashupata weapon. Lord Siva, pleased with the severe penance of the Pandava prince, appears before him and gives him what he desires. However, there are other scholars who feel that the person performing penance is not Arjuna but Bhagiratha, an ancestor of Rama who prayed to Lord Siva to

hold the celestial river Ganga as she descended from the heaven on to earth. Many other theories have also been suggested for this huge panel, the largest in Asia.

### **Five Rathas**

The five 'rathas' are monolithic monuments in the heart of Mamallapuram. They are cut out of solid granite rock and are fashioned in the shape of temples, each of a different shape and size. According to some, they look like rathas or temple-chariots, and they have been thus named. Over the years, they have also got the name 'Pancha Pandava Rathas', after the characters in the Mahabharata although historically they do not have any connection with this epic. Unfortunately, none of these monolithic monuments is complete. Most scholars agree they were hewn during the time of Narasimhavarma I (c.630-668 C.E.)

### **Draupadi Ratha**

The smallest of the five monolithic temples, which is shaped like a hut, is the one that goes by the name Draupadi Ratha. It is named after Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava princes, but this temple was for Goddess Durga, whose stone image has been carved on the rear wall of the sanctum-sanctorum (garbha-griha). The Goddess is seen in a standing pose with four hands. Her upper right hand holds a discus (chakra), her lower right hand is in the attitude of protection (abhaya hasta), lower left hand is placed on Her hip (kati-hasta) and the upper left hand which must have held a conch (sankha) is unfortunately broken. The entrance to this shrine, has, on either side, the carvings of lady door-guards (dwarapalikas). Two Siva-ganas are sculpted on this rear wall near Durga's head, while two devotees kneel at Her feet. The one chiseled near Her right foot is depicted in the pose of cutting off his own head. This was a form of self-sacrifice in vogue in ancient Tamil Nadu. A similar figure is sculpted at the feet of Goddess Durga in the Varaha cave-temple in Mamallapuram. There is a sculpture of a lion, the mount (vahana) of Durga, carved out of one piece of rock, in front of this shrine.

### **Arjuna Ratha**

Next to the Draupadi Ratha is another monolith named after Arjuna, the Pandava prince, which stands on the same granite base as the former. It is bigger and more ornate than the Draupadi shrine and similar to the biggest monolith in this group called the Dharmaraja Ratha. This temple is incomplete and there is no image inside the garbha-griha. However, since the monolithic sculpture of a bull, the mount (vahana) of Lord Siva is seen behind this shrine, it is possible that this temple was meant to enshrine an image of this deity. The outer walls of this monument have well-wrought sculptures of Vishnu leaning on His vehicle Garuda, Indra (sometimes identified as Subhramanya and as Sasta) on an elephant and Siva leaning on his bull. There are also other attendant images of royal ladies, a sage followed by his disciple and guards, all sculpted in three-quarters profile.

### **Bhima Ratha**

The longest monolith in this group, named Bhima Ratha was probably meant for Vishnu in a reclining form. The fact that all these stone temples were carved from top to bottom is evident here as the upper portions are completed, while the lower parts are unfinished. Why the work of completing this and the other monuments was halted is not known. The

pillars of this 'ratha' have the lion base, a characteristic feature of many Pallava monuments seen in Mamallapuram and elsewhere.

#### **Dharmaraja Ratha**

The biggest and most splendid of the five 'rathas' is the one to the extreme south, called Dharmaraja Ratha after the name of Yudhistira, the eldest of the Pandava princes. It is a three storeyed temple, with plenty of rare sculptures and many inscriptions. It was probably meant for Lord Siva. The top portion of this monument is almost complete, but the bottom part remains unfinished. A flight of stairs was meant to be carved from the ground floor to the first, but was not done. However, there are stairs leading from the first to the second floors. There are sanctums on the first and second storeys. Some of the outstanding images carved on the outer walls of this monolith are of Harihara (composite figure with Vishnu on the left and Siva on the right), Ardhanarishwara (half-Siva and half-Parvati), Brahma, Subrahmanya and a very rare royal portrait of the illustrious Pallava King Narasimhavarman I who commissioned these monuments in the 7th century C.E. A number of Sanskrit inscriptions etched in the Grantha script can be seen on the walls of this monument. All of them are the various titles of King Narasimhavarman I.

#### **Nakula-Sahadeva Ratha**

Situated to the west of the row of four monoliths is another one, small in size called the Nakula-Sahadeva Ratha. This too is an unfinished monument and there is no image inside the sanctum. At the top of the temple is a small sculpture of a six-sided shrine and this has led scholars to suggest that this shrine could have been for Shankmukha (Subrahmanya), the six-faced deity. Supported by two pillars in front with the characteristic lion base, this temple has a rare apsidal shape at the rear. In architectural parlance this is known as Gajaprishta (hind of an elephant). A smaller boulder next to this shrine was, on purpose, carved into the shape of a huge elephant (gaja) by the Pallava sculptors to show that this temple was of the Gajaprishta type.

#### **Ganesha Ratha**

Other than the five monoliths, famously known as the 'Five Rathas', there is yet another very intricately carved monolith called the Ganesha Ratha near the sculptured panel called 'Arjuna's Penance'. It is now called the Ganesha Ratha as there is an image of Ganesha inside. However, this shrine it was originally dedicated to Siva as an inscription on a wall, consisting of eleven Sanskrit stanzas and etched in the Grantha script states that this was a temple for Sambhu (Siva). The entrance to the shrine has two pillars with the lion-base.

#### **Shore Temple**

On the shore of the Bay of Bengal in Mamallapuram stands the very beautiful shrine now referred to as the Shore Temple. It was constructed in the reign of Narasimhavarman II, better known by his famous title Rajasimha in the 8th century C.E. It is a structural temple, constructed of stone blocks, quarried and carried to this location, unlike the monolithic monuments which were chiseled out of boulders. The Shore Temple is actually a temple-complex since there are three sanctums within the enclosure. An image of reclining Vishnu is believed to have been carved here in the reign of Narasimhavarman I (Mamalla) in the 7th century C.E., and his descendent Rajasimha constructed the other two sanctums for Siva on either side of the Vishnu shrine. The Siva sanctum facing east



was called the Kshatriyasimheswara and the other one for the same deity, facing west was known as Rajasimheswara.. In both the Siva shrines, there is an image of Somaskandamurti sculpted on the rear wall (Siva seated with His consort Uma or Parvati next to Him with their son Skanda or Muruga). However, in the east-facing sanctum there is a black polished Linga which is now broken in front of the Somaskanda image, while in the west-facing shrine there is a hole in the ground, but the Linga is not there.

#### **`Krishna's Butter-Ball'**

A huge oval boulder, worn smooth over the centuries, rests on so small a space of the sloping rock that it appears to topple down at any moment. But, it has been in that position for centuries and has been called 'Krishna's butter-ball' by the locals.

#### **Kailasanatha Temple, Kanchipuram**

Kanchipuram, approximately 75 km from Chennai, was the capital of the Pallava kings. There are numerous temples here, many constructed in the Pallava times. One of the most beautiful and one that is most often visited by tourists is the Kailasanatha temple, dedicated to Lord Siva. It is constructed mostly of sandstone and belongs to the reign of King Rajasimha Pallava of the 8th century A.D. The most eye-catching feature of this temple are the rows of small shrines placed around the central shrine. The sculptures found on the walls, of arresting beauty, are of the many forms of Lord Siva and other deities of the Hindu tradition. There are also many inscriptions found on the walls. They contain the numerous titles of King Rajasimha and other details like donations made to the temple over time. Traces of painting are found in some places in this temple indicating that it must have been completely painted in earlier days. A huge sculpture of a bull, Siva's vehicle is seen at a distance from the main temple and directly facing it.

#### **Vaikuntha Perumal Temple, Kanchipuram**

The Vaikuntha Perumal temple, dedicated to Vishnu is located in the heart of Kanchipuram. It was constructed in the 8th century A.D. in the reign of the Pallava King Nandivarman II Pallavamalla. Built almost wholly of sandstone, it is a three tier temple with three vertically aligned sanctums enshrining the seated, reclining and standing forms of Vishnu. The stairways leading from the ground floor to the first floor are concealed and cannot be seen from the outside. The veranda around the main shrine with typical Pallava lions at the base has a number of sculptures on the wall. These sculptures are very unique as they depict the historical events connected with the illustrious dynasty of the Pallavas. The incidents leading to Nandivarman II Pallavamalla, who belonged to a collateral branch of the Pallava dynasty, ascending the throne at Kanchipuram, are graphically depicted along with labeled inscriptions

#### **Mamandur**

Mamandur, a village 15 km from Kanchipuram, is known to archaeologists for four rock-cut cave temples. The architecture, the pillars with the lotus medallions and the few carvings that are here along with one particular inscription, clearly date them to the time of Mahendravarman I Pallava (c.600 -630 A.D.). This inscription is in the Grantha script of the Pallava times and provides important information about this ruler, including some of his titles. In one cave, traces of paintings are seen which suggest that it was completely painted in the 7th century A.D.

**Panamalai**

Panamalai, a small village, approximately 23 km from Vizhupuram, is home to a beautiful stone temple dedicated to Lord Siva. Constructed in the reign of King Rajasimha Pallava in the 8th century, it resembles the Shore Temple in Mamallapuram and the Kailasanatha temple in Kanchipuram constructed in the reign of the same ruler.

The shrine, built of pinkish stone on a small hillock, is called the Talagirishvara temple and enshrines an image of Somaskanda (Siva with Parvati and their son Skanda) and also a Siva Linga in the sanctum. There are traces of very beautiful paintings here which reflect the high degree of perfection the artists of the Pallava times had attained in this field.